

## ARTS AND ACCESSIBILITY: LESSONS OF THE SANKOFA

In one of the world's most prestigious performance centers, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., one hundred activists, artists, and policy makers gathered this past July for the second National Summit on Careers in the Arts for people with disabilities. Eleven years after the first Forum, participants were charged to evaluate the progress and develop new strategies to advance educational and career opportunities in the arts for people with disabilities.

### THE SANKOFA: FLYING FORWARD, LOOKING BACKWARD

Lending their voices to the national dialogue were notable California artists Victoria Ann Lewis Founding Director of the Other Voices Project at the Mark Taper Forum (1982-2002), and Judith Smith, Artistic Director of Axis Dance, a physically integrated dance company. They gave educational and moving presentations of how they have been affected as artists since the initial Forum. Closer to home, the Summit allowed for a moment of reflection on behalf of the California Arts Council (CAC) in its role as a state agency in addressing issues of inclusion, access and artistic excellence.



In Ghana there is a mythical bird called the Sankofa that flies forward with its head turned backwards. For the CAC, the Sankofa embodies the significance of mining the lessons of past years in order to best guide, inspire, and motivate the next generation of arts leaders with disabilities.

### BREAKING GROUND

The 1998 National Forum on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities was a landmark gathering that provided the motivation and the tools to review

and advance the national dialogue. Since then, the National Endowment of the Arts' (NEA) Office of AccessAbility, led by Paula Terry, has sponsored 26 state arts agencies to convene statewide Forums. The 2003 CAC statewide forum, *Hire Value*, was a collaboration among VSA arts, arts employers, arts organizations, disability service providers and most importantly artists with disabilities, to identify strategies and implement activities to support arts careers.



### CALIFORNIA TAKES ACTION

In a state as large as California, the need to collaborate with others to address all of the issues is essential. One of the CAC's most long-standing and important partners is the National Arts and Disability Center (NADC), out of UCLA. The CAC consults and collaborates with Dr. Olivia Raynor, the Director of the NADC, regarding access issues for artists and audiences with disabilities.

As a result of *Hire Value* came the Arts and Accessibility Technical Assistance Program and the Arts and Disability Network. The CAC and NADC make grants available of up to \$500 for artists with disabilities and arts organizations to enhance participation in the arts by people with disabilities. Since 2003, 138 arts organizations have received grants to provide access services, such as sign language interpreters or audio description. Thirty-seven artists with disabilities received grants towards their professional development (e.g. training, materials, performances and exhibits). The CAC has continuously supported the mini-grant program even as its budget was decreased.

## THE CALIFORNIA ARTS AND DISABILITY NETWORK (ADN)

The *Hire Value* conference was the impetus to establish the Arts and Disability Network (ADN), one of the CAC's Statewide Networks Program grantees. ADN created new opportunities for communication, networking, performances and exhibits organized by artists with disabilities in partnership with Arts and Services for the Disabled and the De Young Museum.

## SO WHAT IS NEXT?

Across all disciplines participating in the National Summit, there was one essential message: a call to



engage and empower young artists with disabilities. In California we are beginning the process of identifying and engaging the next generation of youth leaders. You can join the dialogue by connecting with each other through a youth-focused page

on Facebook: Rising Artists with Disabilities.

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*Photo credits in order of appearance:*

*Axis Dance Company: Sankofa, mystical bird from Ghana; Color Field by Kurt Weston, a legally blind photographer; and Blue Moon by Neville Buchan, The Berkeley Creative Living Center.*

Wayne Cook is the CAC's ADA/504 Coordinator. In this role he continues to work on behalf of disability issues on a national, statewide, and local basis.

